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Group pushes statewide tax for road building

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PHOENIX — State transportation officials say Arizona is at a crossroads when it comes to future road construction with funding expected to decline in a few years.

A new Arizona Department of Transportation report shows that most of Arizona will run out of money to build new roads by 2015.

The state estimates transportation funding will fall to the point that much of the state will only be able to maintain and preserve existing roadways.

The major metropolitan areas will feel it too, but unlike the rest of the state, it collects a half-cent transportation tax.

Victor Mendez, Arizona Department of Transportation Director, describes the situation as a crisis. "No expansion. No new projects. That's what we're facing," he said.

The state has identified nearly \$42.6 billion worth of critical transportation needs.

How to pay for future road projects in one of the fastest growing states in the nation may lie with a new 1 cent statewide sales tax over 30 years and more participation by the private sector in transportation projects.

The money would pay for roadways, rail projects, street improvements, buses and other transportation projects across the state, officials said.

A group of business and economic-development leaders called the TIME coalition (Transportation & Infrastructure Moving AZ's Economy) are pushing the plan.

It's also backed by Gov. Janet Napolitano. The projects are supposed to serve the state's transportation needs to 2030.

The project list could be changed as the planning process continues, Mendez said.

Advocates hope to get the plan on this year's ballot.

TIME said it will file ballot language with the Secretary of State's Office soon in order to begin gathering some of the 153,365 valid signatures it will need to submit by July 3. The coalition says the state can't afford to wait several years before making a significant effort to improve transportation, especially since projects take a long time to build once they are approved.

Supporters said the projects are needed to preserve the state's quality of life and to maintain, and increase, the ability to attract and retain businesses.

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